

# Guide to Tutorials



A feature of university learning is that many courses are delivered via a series of lectures and tutorials. This combination is one that, if you're new to uni study, you may not have encountered before. To get the most out of lectures and tutorials, you need to be an independent and active learner.

## What are tutorials?

Tutorials are small discussion-based groups of students enrolled in a particular course. Each group is led by a tutor.

Tutorials usually take place in classrooms and are less formal than lectures. Tutorials might be structured around particular activities or be more free-flowing, giving students the opportunity to raise topics, ask questions and explore ideas. Tutorials involve a much higher level of interaction than lectures



do. All students are expected to participate.

## What happens in tutorials?

Unlike lectures, tutorials don't usually involve receiving information and taking notes. Tutes are usually structured according to the discipline. For example, a tutorial might be focussed around group discussions of key course topics or set reading material. Students may deliver oral presentations preceding a group discussion. Sometimes students work on exercises or activities, such as weekly case studies or a set of prepared questions.

## What is the purpose of tutorials?

Talking and listening to other students and the tutor can help to:

- clarify your understanding of what you are learning
- advance your knowledge and understanding of a topic or issue through discussion
- try out ideas by talking them through with others
- hear a range of different perspectives
- improve your thinking, listening and discussion skills

Finding 'the right words' for your thoughts and ideas, and fully articulating them, takes time and practice. Take the opportunity offered in tutorials to develop the skill of expressing yourself clearly.

Successful tutorials depend on students doing the preparation and demonstrating their involvement through active listening as well being able to speak out.

## Do I have to attend tutorials?

Yes. Attendance is recorded and course marks are given for class participation.

## Oral presentations in tutorials



Many courses require students to deliver an oral presentation as part of their assessment, and to follow their presentation by leading a tutorial discussion on the topic. Even if you are not presenting, you still need to prepare for the seminar by reading the required material, and once the presentation has begun, by listening actively, asking questions, and participating in the discussion.

### What does 'tutorial participation' involve and how can I do it?

Tutorial participation requires more than just being present; it involves actively participating and preparing:

- Doing assigned readings (and any other preparation)
- Contributing to group discussions
- Demonstrating an understanding of the topic based on the assigned readings
- Asking questions
- Listening actively
- Working collaboratively with other students
- Participating in tutorial activities

### How can I participate?

Participation doesn't require nonstop talking; what is important is the quality of your contributions. You can contribute by:

- raising a point (with evidence)
- giving an example to illustrate or build on what someone else has said
- asking or answering questions
- acknowledging someone else's point, or expressing why you agree or disagree.
- returning the discussion to the main point

Don't just address all remarks to the tutor. Support others in the tutorial by engaging.



Speaking isn't the only way to contribute. You can demonstrate that you are participating by listening, by looking at the speakers, and showing by your body language that you are actively listening and are part to the group (eg look interested when another student is speaking, sit forward slightly)

 More about **Discussion skills**

## Getting the most out of tutorials

### Before

- **Know what the topic area** is for that particular week. Refer to your course outline.
- **Complete any required reading** or activities. This is essential; if you haven't done any preparation then you won't be able to contribute effectively.
- **Review** the most recent lecture notes.
- **Identify what you do and don't understand about the topic** or the readings. Note down a few questions you could ask.
- Formulate at least one **brief possible contribution** to the discussion - it might be a thought, a definition, a notable piece of information or a comment. This will help you feel prepared and prompt you to contribute during class.
- **Set up pages for note-taking.** At the top of each page write the date, the week, the course name and tutorial topic. If you're using a laptop, prepare a document template along the same lines.

### During

- **Arrive on time**, find a seat and unpack before discussion begins.
- Tutorials give you an opportunity to meet other students and interact with academic staff. **Greet the tutor** and, if you don't know the students sitting next to you, **introduce yourself**. It's important to get to know



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your colleagues—they can provide important so that you can set up support networks.

- **Put your phone away** and (if you're using a laptop) **stay offline**. Give the group the courtesy of your attention.
- **Listen carefully** to the discussion.
- **Make a contribution**. Raise questions or seek clarification about points not understood.
  - If you agree with something, express it, either verbally or non-verbally (with a nod and a smile).
  - If you disagree, instead of rejecting what you disagree with, explore it. Ask polite questions and seek further discussion.
  - If you came with questions, try to get answers before the end of the tute.
- **Keep any contribution relevant**. Is your comment related to the topic or the reading being discussed?
- **Take notes**. Jot down the main points, but concentrate on filling gaps in your knowledge. Note down what you find interesting, confusing, relevant.

### After

- **Complete any unfinished reading**.
- **Revise your tutorial notes**. Note down any new words or concepts while they are still fresh in your mind.
- **Note any thoughts and questions** you have about the tutorial discussion.
- **Identify gaps** that remain in your understanding. Work out how you can clarify important points—would further reading help, or should you consult with your tutor?



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### Further reading

Brick, J 2006, *Academic culture: a student's guide to studying at university*, Macquarie University, Sydney.

Burdess, N 1991, *The handbook of student skills for the social sciences and humanities*, Prentice Hall, Victoria.

Marshall, L & Rowland, F 2006, *A Guide to Learning Independently*, 4th edn, Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest.

Northedge, A 1990, *The good study guide*, Open University, Milton Keynes.

Percy, D 1983, *Study tactics*, Macmillan, Melbourne.

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